

**NARRATOR: Huston, Elmer & Wilma**

**INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves**

**DATE: August 14, 2000**

**LOCATION: Nampa, Idaho**

**PROJECT: Smokejumpers/Forest Fire Fighters**

**Tape**

**Counter**

**Summary**

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000	Introduction.
010	Elmer Huston gave his family background. His family worked in agriculture in southwest Idaho.
025	Elmer began his forest service work in 1943, before he went off to fight in World War II, as a member of the trail crew in the Atlanta district inside the Boise National Forest.
050	After two weeks working by himself on the brush crew, the ranger sent him to the fire school in Idaho City. Huston talked about what he did when he “worked the trail” and what he learned at the fire school.
085	Huston fought two fires during the 1943 fire season and also worked the trail during that summer.
095	Huston enlisted in the Navy in the spring of 1944. He discussed what he did in the Navy during and after World War II.
120	After he mustered out of the military, he returned to the forest service in the summer of 1946. Huston discussed what he did that summer and what he did for the forest service when he was not fighting fire. He talked, in detail, about marking timber for timber sales.
160	Huston was a seasonal employee; he worked from Crookham Seed Company in Caldwell during the fall, winter, and part of the spring.
170	Both Elmer and Wilma described working on lookouts after they married in 1949. They talked about how they met, and Wilma spoke about her background before she met Elmer. They specifically worked on the Thunderbolt Lookout near Warm Lake.
240	Elmer claimed that lookouts are “the eyes of the forest.” He gave his opinion on the importance of lookouts in fighting fire. They both talked about what lookouts did during the summer. They also described the function of the alledate [?], which is a piece of equipment that the lookout used to map fires.

- 340 The next year the couple moved to the Johnson Creek guard station. They talked about their roles at that location. They also reiterated their jobs at the lookout, including knowing the area and knowing the differences among smoke, steam, dust, and the sunset or sunrise. Since there was no radio communication in the early days, people who fought fires fought them until they were out or until the lookout asked the dispatcher for more help.
- 430 Wilma and Elmer were paid one wage for the their work. The forest service expected the lookouts and guard stations to be peopled for 24 hours.
- 450 Elmer and Wilma explained the differences between lookout work and guard station work. Wilma described getting use to cooking at high (around 10,000 feet) elevation.
- 490 **END OF SIDE ONE**  
**TAPE ONE SIDE TWO**
- 000 Wilma explained the isolation that lookouts felt during the summer, especially in the late 1940s/early 1950s before the improvements in communication.
- 015 They had more freedom while at the guard station. Wilma discussed how she made and preserved food, especially without refrigeration. She also talked about how she used water for multiple uses during the day.
- 050 When they were at the guard station, Wilma would listen for the phone while Elmer was out maintaining the forest. When she heard about a fire, she would get Elmer. Elmer would fight the fire, and Wilma would run the guard station.
- 065 They discussed where they lived while Elmer worked for Crookham Seed Company. He did not receive permanent employment with the forest service until 1959.
- 075 Elmer served as a smokejumper in 1952 and 1954. He really enjoyed smokejumping and felt he could have stayed with the smokejumpers throughout his career, because he liked to fight fire. Wilma did not see Elmer a lot when he jumped, so she did not like these summers as much as the other summers fighting fire.
- 150 The Hustons talked about all of the places they worked before Elmer received a permanent position in 1959. Elmer described his frustration working on a seasonal basis for over ten years.

- 185 Neither Elmer nor Wilma went to college. They discussed why they did not go. They also described how the Depression affected their mindset, including why they held on to a job.
- 240 In 1959 Elmer received a permanent position with forest service as a fire control officer. He detailed the jobs that this officer did during the year and the chain of command in a forest district.
- 285 In the forest district, fireguards and lookouts worked at various points of the district. Elmer explained how he dispatched those people, as well as asking for smokejumpers, to a fire near them. Elmer also described the relationship between the district and the dispatcher for the forest. Wilma felt that the dispatcher trusted the fire control officer, so he would give the officer what he needed to fight the fire.
- 365 Elmer and Wilma discussed the "Old Forest Service." They fed people who needed food, gave people a bed that needed rest, and helped anyone who needed help. Their job gave them long lasting friends.
- 430 They both gave their opinions about how and why the forest service employees changed. They felt they worked to serve the public.
- 450 The use of manpower changed over time. Elmer discussed how that happened and how the budget changed.
- 495 **END OF SIDE TWO**  
**TAPE TWO SIDE ONE**
- 000 After Elmer left, the forest's leaders bought a pumper truck and used less fire fighters. Elmer believed these facts really hampered the forest when they had bad fire seasons. With the situation they have in the present, meaning many large fires, Elmer and Wilma felt that only rain or snow would put those fires out.
- 030 Wilma talked about how forest service employees would work on keeping buildings up to date, when they were not fighting fires. She felt these building have fallen into disrepair because of fewer workers on the forest.
- 050 Elmer described the forest service's 10 a.m. Policy, which he worked under in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and why 10 a.m. was the time slotted by the forest service to put out the fires. He also gave his opinion on the use of slurey bombers on forest fires.
- 080 Elmer and Wilma talked about the technological changes, specifically the movement from crosscut saws to chainsaws. Elmer believed chainsaws really helped fight fire and clear trail. Elmer told a story about how he and

Wilma cleared a trail quickly with a chainsaw so Governor Robert Smylie could pass through on a “show-me” trip in the 1950s. He then followed with a story that during retirement he met two forest service employees who were taking days to clear a trail without a chainsaw, because chainsaws are not allowed in certain areas.

- 205 Elmer did not use tractors on his district to fight fire. He felt that helicopters really aided the forest service in fighting fire.
- 230 Elmer thought smokejumpers were the best tool to fight fire. He felt that smokejumpers get to fires quickly to suppress them. Elmer talked specifically about James “Smoky” Stover, who worked at the Idaho City jump base.
- 275 During Elmer’s time there were overhead crews that would fight project fires. Elmer served on one of those overhead crews while working for the forest service. He described how a person would serve on an overhead crew.
- 315 As a member of an overhead crew, Elmer fought on many project fires in many western states. He talked about who took over his job when he left the district to fight project fires.
- 340 Elmer described the physical training that he faced when fire season began. His training was more strenuous when he was a smokejumper. Wilma told a story about a young man who wanted to be a smokejumper; Elmer told him to do more exercise than the jumpers required. This man, Kenny Smith, playfully teased Elmer about making him do more than he needed to.
- 375 Along with physical training, Elmer took classes, mainly during the initial fire school, to train mentally to fight fire. Wilma thought that the forest service employees during their time competed but they kept it friendly.
- 400 Elmer told a story about a young recruit who married just before he was hired. He and Elmer fought fire for weeks before this man could return to his new bride. Wilma told a story about how she and Elmer always provided a hand (or food or a shower) to people who stopped by.
- 470 **END OF SIDE ONE**  
**TAPE TWO SIDE TWO**
- 013 Elmer and Wilma talked about keeping a weather station at the guard station to keep the forest service in tune with the weather at each station.

- 020 Elmer remembered that the 10 a.m. Policy was the guideline for most of his career, particularly when he worked full time in 1959.
- 035 When Elmer retired, he could have worked for a few more years. He felt that things were changing so much that he wanted to retire. He did feel that some changes were for the better, particularly overtime for work over 40 hours a week and four ten-hour days per week.
- 065 Elmer and Wilma described how animals (horses and mules) helped fight fires. Elmer told a story about a forest ranger who put out seven fires in one day with the help of his mule. As a youngster he remember how CCC workers fought large fires with the help of horses and mules.
- 095 During the early years that Elmer fought fire, the forest service used ranchers, farmers, and loggers helped fight fire with personnel and equipment.
- 115 Since Elmer retired, they travel when they want to and enjoy their free time.
- 135 Elmer enjoyed working for the forest service. Wilma gave her perspective of being an unpaid volunteer for the forest service, and she grew to love the mountains and forest. Elmer and Wilma both felt that the forest service would do more by returning to some of the old systems.
- 185 **END OF SIDE TWO**  
**END OF INTERVIEW**

## **NAMES AND PLACES INDEX**

Atlanta, Idaho  
Boise National Forest  
Caldwell, Idaho  
Carey, Herb  
Chenoweth, Jack  
Conyers [?], Shorty  
Crookham Seed Company (Caldwell, Idaho)  
Dutch Creek (Idaho)  
Idaho City, Idaho  
Iwojima (World War II)  
Jackson Hole, Wyoming  
Johnson Creek (Idaho)  
Kendall, Jack  
Okinawa (World War II)  
Sea Foam (Idaho)  
Seals, Milt  
Smith, Kenny  
Smylie, Robert  
Starr, George  
Stover, James "Smoky"  
United States Forest Service  
Warm Lake (Idaho)